



**Testimony Prepared for the Ohio House Education Committee**  
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Chairman Stebelton, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today in support of House Bill 21.

I am the Dean of Academics as well as a full-time mathematics teacher at Columbus Collegiate Academy. I grew up in Brecksville, Ohio, and graduated Summa Cum Laude and Phi Beta Kappa from The Ohio State University. I was one of only seventeen percent of nearly 19,000 applicants accepted into the 2006 Teach For America Corps. Happily accepting, I taught sixth grade in southeast Washington, D.C. for two years after graduation. During that time, I experienced great success with my students, raising test scores and climbing to grade-level chair after the first year. I also earned a Masters of Education degree from American University.

I loved Washington, D.C., but it wasn't a place I wanted to put down roots. I had learned a great deal from my two years working for the DC Public Schools, and came back home to Columbus to a new school where I could work with an extremely talented group of individuals to implement the changes we knew needed to be made in order to close the achievement gap between poor and minority children and their more privileged counterparts. I became a founding teacher and am now Dean of Academics at Columbus Collegiate Academy, which has become one of the most successful college-preparatory middle schools in the city and the country. We recently were one of only 22 schools in the nation, and the only in Ohio, to receive the 2010 Effective Practice Incentive Community (EPIC) award based on growth in student achievement.

My deep involvement in successful urban education gives me a unique perspective on the issues you're considering today. I'd like to speak with you about both the pathway to licensure for Teach For America alumni in House Bill 21, as well as the larger issue concerning evaluating teacher effectiveness and performance.

Working at Columbus Collegiate Academy, CCA, has been a dream come true. My colleagues are intelligent, passionate, and serious about fixing the problems of inner city education. Like me, however, many of my colleagues, especially those who are also Teach For America alums, are frustrated by the bureaucracy they've encountered when dealing with the Ohio Department of Education in the area of licensure.

When I first began teaching in Columbus, many of my colleagues and I were teaching under long-term substitute licenses. I'd like to share my story with you now, because I know that it is typical of other TFA teachers in my situation who come back home to teach here in Ohio. When I called the Ohio Department of Education in 2008, I was told that my two successful years of teaching sixth grade in one of the toughest areas of Washington, D.C. and my Masters of Education degree, grades 1-6, would only qualify me to receive a K-3 license here in Ohio. I didn't want to teach K-3; I wanted to teach what I loved - my passion: mathematics – to a group of students old enough to see the life path they're on, and change it if they want to.

Consider my credentials: I work an average of 70-80 hours per week, and I'm proud to stand up here and get to brag a bit about my kids at CCA. We all work really hard. Under my instruction, math proficiency on the Ohio Achievement Test jumped from 41% to 82%. In just one year, my students achieved more than two and a half times the "expected yearly growth" as measured by the nationally recognized Northwest Evaluation Association's Measures of Academic Progress. In the following year under my instruction, math proficiency jumped from 30% to 80% proficiency, and my seventh graders, after two years with me, achieved 100% proficiency on the Math OAA.

I've proven that I know the best practices and have the skills to inspire kids to reach their potential. Yet, according to the Ohio Department of Education, I was not qualified to receive full licensure in middle school mathematics.

I've made progress with the Ohio Department of Education, but it's been slow. I've really had to argue my case. I submitted a lot of documentation, including professional development, course work, and results of AP, SAT, and ACT exams, all of which place me in the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile in mathematics aptitude. I received a series of steps outlined by the Credential Review Board, took two more Praxis tests in addition to the three on which I've already excelled; then had to reapply. The good news for me is that I've been granted a professional license. Some of my colleagues are still working on their second applications.

My experiences are typical of other Teach For America alums wanting to return to Ohio. I've heard my own story told back to me by others who've also hit a wall when trying to make progress toward licensure. In many cases, great teachers have chosen to leave the profession and move on to higher paying jobs with a lot less red tape. Teach For America alums haven't been welcomed back home to Ohio, but rather, obstacles have been put in our paths. In other fields, having Teach For America behind your name is an advantage. Many companies and graduate programs offer deferments, scholarships, and other incentives in an effort to recruit those who have already proven themselves in this highly selective and challenging program. MIT, Stanford, and Harvard; Google, Goldman Sachs, and Deloitte, to barely brush the surface, are all actively offering incentives to Teach For America alums. They know how selective the program is, and they want these people. Just last year, over 100 top graduates from Ohio matriculated into TFA. Over time, we are losing hundreds of our best people to other states and professions. We should be enticing these graduates back home to continue their service, not turning teaching in their home state into a hassle. The teaching profession here in Ohio doesn't offer anything to this incredible collection of brain power and experience. We're losing great people who want to return home and make a difference here in the state they love. Passing House Bill 21 would ensure that we could begin to grab our

share of this talent, staying competitive with companies and graduate programs as well as other states.

However, the conversation shouldn't end there. Teach For America alums and other like-minded organizations which have demonstrated proven success in the area of inner city education also generally share an ideology about how to evaluate teacher effectiveness. We not only think it's *possible* to evaluate teachers, there is a growing consensus on the best ways to do it, which is what I'd like to discuss next.

One of the saddest things I've learned about our country through the vast network of TFA alums is how similar so many of our experiences have been in urban schools across the country. By and large, effective teachers go unnoticed, and ineffective teachers are allowed to continue not providing the excellent education our students deserve.

I'd like to begin discussing teacher evaluation by talking about how I myself was evaluated as a new teacher in southeast DC. I had one formal observation in two years, and I'm not sure that one counted. The principal insisted that her observation include a full lesson, from opening to closing. However, she kept answering her cell phone during the lesson that morning, each time telling me to "pause" the student learning while she argued with a parent. About 15 minutes in, she told me she would be back in five, and to have the students "do worksheets" while we waited for her to return, when I would then pick up the lesson where I'd left off so that she wouldn't miss a thing. When her absence reached the 20 minute mark, I radioed the office to see if she was coming back. I was informed that we'd have to pick up the lesson that afternoon, and not to continue with it until she returned at the newly scheduled time, 3 hours later. I didn't wait, which didn't matter, because she never returned. Somehow, I was rated effective that year.

This story is absurd – to anyone who hasn't worked in a failing inner city school. To a TFA alum, this sounds about right.

TFA teachers are taught how to monitor their own effectiveness by regularly testing students on objectives and continually modifying how we present material so we can maximize student learning. Using student data is the only thing that makes sense to us. As teachers, our job is to teach. If my students haven't learned the material, I can't very well say I've taught them anything. We are not employed to present material; we are employed to teach students concepts and skills that will allow them to determine their own path in life. My title isn't "talker," it's "teacher." So many schools in our state have no idea how to evaluate their teachers, and scenes like the one I've described happen much more often than we'd like to think.

This debate about how to determine which teachers are effective has been a controversial issue. But I argue that teacher evaluation is not as elusive as we are led to believe. Many highly successful school networks like Building Excellent Schools, UnCommon Schools, KIPP, and countless others have begun to embrace a set of common practices around determining teacher effectiveness. They are accomplishing the seemingly impossible task. At CCA, we have adopted many of these now common practices in order to ensure that our students are taught by the very best.

As Dean of Academics, I am responsible for evaluating all teachers. I've had the honor of learning from great mentors like Andrew Boy and John Dues at Columbus Collegiate Academy. Needless to say, my methods look very different from what I went through while working in DC Public Schools. Evaluating the effectiveness of teachers is not actually all that difficult.

Here's my how-to:

Number One: Require more from the start: hire well. We require staff to go through an interview, but then also require them to teach a sample lesson, and take a content test in the subject area they'd like to teach. When John Dues, the former Dean at CCA asked me to do this, he apologetically began to explain something to the effect of, I'm sure you can pass this – please don't be offended, but we require this of all our applicants. I interrupted him and said I knew exactly why he was requiring that I demonstrate mastery of sixth grade math. It was common place for fully licensed teachers at my school in DC to tell students to *multiply* the base by the exponent to solve an exponential, to misunderstand order of operations, and one teacher was even unable to solve multi-digit multiplication problems without a calculator. It turns out having a degree doesn't mean a whole lot, especially an education degree. I'm sorry to offend: please remember – I have one.

Second secret to success: Monitor teaching often and help teachers improve. Our teachers get an informal, unplanned, 15-20 minute observation with feedback about every two weeks, or more often if we are working on a specific skill with that teacher. They also have longer scheduled observations three times a year. We have a common set of standards about what good teaching looks like. We use Doug Lemov's Taxonomy of Effective Teaching Practices, so that teachers clearly understand, through video clips and observing others, what good teaching is. We are currently working with EPIC, who recently visited our school, to video-document this practice in order to share what we're doing with other schools around the nation who want to improve their quality of teaching.

Third: We look at data very carefully. We give students multiple diagnostic tests at the beginning of the year, reassess about every three weeks, track individual students against objective benchmarks (much as we were taught in Teach For America), and continually analyze current instructional techniques, always looking for a more effective way to teach content. Also, we don't simply look at proficiency rates as a measure of where students are academically. I think that would be a mistake. We do use the OAA, but we also use other assessments, which measure incremental growth more precisely. It's not all about proficiency rates at CCA; it's about moving kids forward toward success in college and beyond.

The difference between a school that effectively delivers the promise of a bright future and schools that don't is something our students actually speak about pretty often, and as a teacher, this is what makes it all worth-while.

Michelle, one of my former students, recently wrote an essay about how her life has changed and the difference her teachers at CCA have made. She writes,

In elementary school [before CCA]... I saw myself as a dumb student. I didn't understand my classes; I cried at home when asked to say my multiplication facts, and I hated reading because I couldn't say the words correctly. .... In class, the

teachers would give instructions and go to their desks. The students would then talk all period. In elementary school, I didn't learn much. I didn't have a future.

Then she writes about the transition to CCA.

The teachers...[at CCA] taught us what we know now. They made us smart. [Our teacher] pushed us to not freak out if a problem gets hard. She told us to go step by step, and we would find the answer. I remember in 7th grade, [my teacher] would grade my pre-algebra tests, and if I got 100%, she would show me and tell me how proud she was. I remember her telling me that I got a 100% on one of her hard tests and she said that if I worked hard enough, anything is possible.

Michelle is now at the top of her class. She is testing well above students her own age from every socioeconomic background across the nation. Michelle has a future - now. She has any future she wants.

There is no *one* reason so many of our kids and schools in low income areas of Ohio are failing; there is every reason – home life, poor teaching, poor nutrition and health care, lack of resources, instability and crime. Kids from low-income areas are just not expected to succeed. Amazingly, some do. And often, it is because those kids had amazing teachers who made the difference. To fight all of those dynamics, and give kids a real shot at a future, it really does take the relentless efforts of amazing people in our schools. We need to act now to hold teachers and administrators accountable to their own titles – to really *teach* our students. We are letting too many students stay in the past that Michelle describes. Redesigning teacher evaluations to measure instructional effectiveness is not a partisan issue, and it's not an insult to teachers. It's not even really about *adults* at all. It's about doing the right thing for kids like Michelle. They deserve it. We need more successful people like TFA alums and my colleagues at CCA in our classrooms across the state, and we need a way to recognize and promote teachers who are highly effective. The best way to do this is by actually looking at the results of their efforts: what our students are learning.

Thank you Chairman Stebelton and members of the committee for the honor of speaking with you. I appreciate your time as I've shared my experiences with you today.